

THE SIMKIN *effect*

FALLING IN LOVE WITH CHENNAI

"Chennai is a place of hidden treasures", remarks Mr. Andrew Simkin, in awe. After his arrival in August 2008, the Consul General has adapted easily to the Indian lifestyle. "I have been working in the State Department in the Foreign Service for almost 23 years. I had a chance to visit India for the first time in support of President Clinton's visit in 2000. Five years ago, I visited Chennai again when I was working in the Bureau of Consular Affairs. Each time, I had a very nice experience and when I was ready to take on another foreign assignment, an opportunity came up to serve in Chennai. I jumped at the chance and have been very happy to have done so".

Mr. Andrew T. Simkin,
the US Consul General in Chennai is deeply fascinated by the myriad sights and sounds of the city. In a vibrant conversation, he tells us about his love for Chennai, the misconceptions of the visa process and the diplomatic relationship between the two countries.



So, what makes Chennai special for this American? "The city has kind and appreciative people. I've travelled to many other places which were different, interesting and well worth visiting. But, I wouldn't want to go back. After experiencing Chennai, I realized that it's a place where one would want to keep coming back. There's so much to learn here in India and it's a very rich place in terms of experiences, people that one meets and institutions to interact with", he explains.

THE VISA REVOLUTION

Getting a US visa is nothing short of an achievement, considering the long waiting time and millions of applications to be processed. But surprisingly, the process of getting a visa is now much simpler – all thanks to the Consul General, Mr. Andrew Simkin. "USA is a great destination - a large country with so much to see and so much to do! A lot of people are eager to visit the US and we very much support that. Every day, a vast majority of people come away with a multiple entry visa for ten years - that's the standard visa we issue for tourism and businesses and we issue hundreds of them every day. The process has never been more efficient than it is today", he says.

Efficiency is the watch word as the American Embassy has now made the process of getting a visa a lot easier. "My background has been in consular services and I feel very strongly that it's important to provide those services efficiently and fairly. I was fortunate that when I'd arrived, already so much hard work had been done to bring the wait time down and I kept pushing till it could be brought down to a bare minimum. If you go online and book an appointment, you'll find that it's available in two business days! We have the fastest service in India here in Chennai. That wasn't the case a year or two ago! There was a waiting time of weeks or even months to get an appointment. Now, I find many people telling me how efficient it was or how

friendly the visa officer was and even how well the whole process worked. So, it's important for people not to be deterred by thinking that it's difficult to get a US visa. We really do want to facilitate travel and people who have plans for tourism and family visits", says Mr. Simkin, on an enthusiastic note.

THE INDIAN ELEMENT

United States of America still ranks as the top most destinations for a majority of Indians. "I think that people of India and US need to know each other better and better. Firstly, it's because of the amount of travel taking place between the two countries. So many Indians have traveled to US for studies, work, tourism, family visits and immigration. We have a very rapidly growing Indian-American community and they're becoming very prominent in so many different spheres of life in the US – like business, politics, arts, sciences and so many areas. The number of American citizens visiting India has been swiftly growing for several years now. As a result of this people to people contact, there are positive feelings as people of India have a high regard for the United States and its vice versa", elaborates Mr. Simkin.

THE DIPLOMATIC DIALOGUES

On the diplomatic front, the past few years had witnessed a pinnacle in the Indo – US relations. "I think at the Government to Government level, we could take advantage of the things which we have in common and approach in terms of our values, national interests and the kind of countries which we are. We're successful democracies and both countries are bringing together a large complex nation with a lot of

diversity – geographic, ethnic, religious, and linguistic. It works because we draw strength from that diversity. The Prime Minister's recent visit to Washington gave a lot of momentum to the process. We're seeing more rapid progress on the diplomatic side between the two countries", admits the Consul General, Mr. Andrew Simkin on a proud note.



A FAMILY AFFAIR

The Simkin family has perfectly blended in with the colourful life of Chennai. Mrs. Simkin, a registered nurse exudes an ethnic aura clad in a cotton salwar which embodies her tryst with the city and its traditions. Their children, two sons and a daughter are currently studying in the United States. "The children visit us on vacations and we visit different places across the country. We totally love it here", concludes Mr. Simkin.

- Tuba Raqshan